



'The engine just started coughing!' – Limits of physical performance, aging and career continuity in elite endurance sports



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ABSTRACT

This research examines male endurance athletes' experience of aging and/or reaching the perceived limits of physical performance. More specifically, the current study aimed to explore how existential meanings attached to these experiences are connected with athletes' decision-making concerning career continuity and retirement. Life story interviews were conducted with 10 Finnish runners and/or orienteers aged between 25 and 62 and the data was analyzed with an existential-narrative framework. Four major storylines related to aging were identified: *The end of an era, putting things in perspective, the attitude has to change and winning was never the only motive*. Our results suggest that endurance athletes possess diverse ways of bringing meaning to the experience of aging, both confirming and resisting the dominant cultural narrative of decline. While three athletes' stories confirmed the normativity of retirement when unable to improve their results anymore, other athletes demonstrated career continuity and positive aspects in the late career years, such as lack of competitive anxiety, finding perspective and increased enjoyment in running. We suggest that through awareness of alternative narratives, sport psychology consultants may be able to help their clients to explore new meanings in the potentially challenging and beneficial experiences of aging and athletic retirement.

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Introduction

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in studying the relationship between aging and sport activities, exploring both young athletes' expectations for aging as well as older individuals' experiences of competitive sport, physical activity and meaning assigned to these practices (Phoenix & Griffin, 2011; Roters, Logan, Meisner, & Baker, 2010). Within this research area, however, there has been relatively little attention to elite athletes' experience of aging and encountering the limits

of athletic development.¹ Aging presents a special challenge to athletes, even at a relatively young age, because declining physical performance threatens a career as a professional and/or elite athlete. As Messner (1992) reminds us, sport "is one of the few professions where a twenty-seven year old man can be referred to as a 'veteran', a thirty-five year old as an 'old man'" (p. 112).

¹ As researchers, we acknowledge that athletic development includes other aspects than physical development (e.g., psycho-social development, development of technical and tactical sport skills), and one aim of this paper has been to critically examine how the notion of development is understood in athletic training and in sport research. However, the research participants of the current study discussed "development" consistently in reference with their physical performance and race results, and this is how athletic development is most commonly understood in the Western sport culture. When using the notion of athletic development in this article, we refer to it as the participants understand it.

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In sport psychology research, aging and reaching the limits of athletic development are seen as antecedents to athletic retirement (Taylor, Ogilvie, & Lavallee, 2006). As a potentially challenging life transition, athletic retirement has gained much attention in sport psychology research (for a review, see Park, Lavallee, & Tod, 2013). Inquiry into athletic retirement has revealed themes of void and mortality associated with the experience of this transition (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Tinley, 2012), but it has been also found that retirement can present itself as a social rebirth and a positive experience (Coakley, 1983; Sinclair & Orlick, 1993). These differences have been explained by various factors such as athletic identity, voluntariness of the retirement, achievement level, education and psycho-social support (Park et al., 2013). In suggesting a future direction for athletic retirement research, Park et al. (2013) identified a need to examine age-related issues in relation to the career transitions and to adopt more sport-specific approaches to account for subcultural differences in retirement process. In this study, we aimed to gain contextual understanding of the experiences of aging and performance decline by focusing on the Finnish running and orienteering subcultures. In addition, few studies have addressed athletes' decision-making process concerning retirement, something which most often occurs usually over an extended period of time (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000). In the few existing studies, researchers have sought to identify aspects of the decision-making process leading to athletic retirement, which has been shown to encompass both sport- and non-sport-related factors (Cecić Erpič, Wylleman, & Zupančič, 2004). Moreover, Fernandez, Stephan, and Fouquereau (2006) examined (anti-)pull or (anti-)push factors related to retirement decision-making. However, these studies have not examined how the shifting meanings assigned to development, aging and sport participation itself affect athletes' decision to continue or retire when they reach the final years of their elite and/or professional career.

Based on a comprehensive review of the existing research on aging and sport participation, there appears to be several important areas that have yet to be addressed. In the field of aging studies there are few studies examining elite and/or professional athletes, and in athletic career research, while aging has been mainly listed as a factor in retirement, it has not been examined in terms of the experience of aging and the meaning assigned to it. In addition, few studies have addressed how meaning relates to reaching the perceived limits of athletic development, and the way this may impact on decisions to retire or continue participating in an athletic pursuit. The current study builds upon the first and second author's previous research where we investigated spiritual meanings given to running by athlete columnists in a Finnish runner magazine *Juoksija* (Ronkainen & Ryba, 2012). In that study, we found that spiritual aspects were mainly discussed by older writers, who no longer competed in their top level. Those writers who assigned spiritual meanings to their running practices had continued active running after retiring from competitive sport. To glean additional insights into the experience of growing old as an athlete, the present study was designed to examine two research questions:

1) How do Finnish, male endurance athletes bring meaning to the experience of aging and/or declining physical performance?

2) How does the experience of reaching the limits of physical performance affect career trajectories of endurance athletes?

In this paper, we focus on endurance athletes because literature (Nesti, 2006) suggests that participants in these activities are often more acutely aware of the impact of declining physical capacities than in team sports and more technical and tactical individual sports. In addition, there is some evidence that the high training loads often carried out alone have encouraged some endurance sports performers to take more seriously issues related to the experiential and psychological dimensions of their activities. For example, studies have looked at the prevalence of peak experiences in runners (Murphy & White, 1995), the importance of flow states (Acevedo, Dzewaltowski, Gill, & Noble, 1992; Schüler & Brunner, 2009), and psychological resilience (Crust, Nesti, & Bond, 2010). Popular running literature further suggests that some endurance runners attach spiritual meanings to their sporting practices (Kay, 2007; Sheehan, 1978), an aspect which in general aging research has been shown to become more important as people grow older (Atchley, 2009; Koenig, 2006).

Our work is based on an understanding of aging as grounded in athletes' bodily experiences, yet interpreted within one's socio-cultural context. With this in mind, the aim of this study was to gain an insight on how athletes negotiate meaning in their athletic practices when reaching the limits of physical performance. The empirical material consisted of ten in-depth life story interviews with mature runners and orienteers. By focusing upon a group of elite athletes, many of whom are not old in the ordinary sense, our attention is on a sub-cultural group that has been largely ignored in aging research. By framing our inquiry within the intersection of existentialism and narrative inquiry, we hope to bring a fresh theoretical perspective to aging and athletic career research.

Perceptions of aging – competing stories of growing old

The sociological and psychological research on aging has gained much attention in the past decade, which also reflects the demographic changes in the Western societies (Vertinsky, 2002). As Gergen and Gergen (1986) assert, the dominant view on life course in psychology is based on a narrative plot of development in childhood and youth (progression narrative) and decline in old age (regressive narrative). Indeed, there is an agreement among researchers that the dominant script for aging in Western cultures is that of decline (Phoenix & Griffin, 2011; Vertinsky, 2002). In peoples' imaginations growing older is associated with deterioration of both physical and mental capabilities, loneliness and social exclusion (Längle, 2001) and narrowing of one's life sphere. Yet, as Gergen and Gergen (1986) illustrate, if spontaneity was chosen as the major goal and value, human life would show itself as a regressive narrative. Conversely, in a culture which values accumulating wisdom and life experience, the aging process would be seen as progression. Recently, several researchers have illustrated some alternative storylines of aging that provide means to resist the master narrative of decline (Phoenix & Smith, 2011; Trethewey, 2001; Tulle, 2008). These research findings have illuminated the power of narratives to offer alternative, more empowering ways to experience and represent aging (Phoenix & Griffin, 2011).

Athletes and aging

The athlete's physical decline is unlike anyone else's. Athletes suffer the assaults of time as others do not. (...) Appearance is subjective, achievement—for runners if not for divers and gymnasts and figure-skaters—is objective. Friends can flatter you about your allegedly youthful appearance—"Oh! You look really wonderful!"—but no one can convince you that you are faster than you were twenty years ago. No one can convince you that your record has not been surpassed.

[Guttmann, 2001, p. 297]

While several sport researchers have sought to reveal ways to challenge the dominant aging-as-decline narrative (e.g., Phoenix & Smith, 2011; Phoenix & Sparkes, 2008; Tulle, 2008), sport has also been shown to be resistant to radical constructivist understanding of aging (Wainwright & Turner, 2006). That is, the body is not only a social construct, but also a lived entity which is affected by physiological aging. The attention to athletes' objective physical performance has increased due to the growth of sport sciences, which have provided more and more technology to accurately assess physiological capacities. Endurance sports, which are at the heart of this study, are sport subcultures where performance mainly consists of the physical element, instead of tactics and skills. In running, performance is most often measured in standardized race distances. Running subculture has been characterized as a modernist sport where the strict measurement has been shown to be experienced both as alienating and oppressing (Marnham, 1980) and empowering (Chalmers, 2005). Orienteering, although employing partly same training and performance testing methods, is a more complex sport where the athletes' race results depend on both running performance and the ability to read the map and the terrain in order to find the fastest possible route. Endurance sport subcultures, in general, value more exclusively physical, measurable capacities than many other sports practices.

In their research on aging ballet dancers, Wainwright and Turner (2003) proposed that for dancers the bodily aging constitutes "the ontology of aging", leaving little room for agency. That is, they not only suffer from the negative cultural attitudes towards aging, but they also lose their profession and income when unable to perform their physically demanding work. Wainwright and Turner (2003) found that ballet dancers had two strategies to manage aging; either attempting to ignore its presence or make a decision to retire from professional ballet. Given the centrality of physicality in athletes' daily lives, the moreover propose that "it also seems likely that the inevitable decline of physical capital of the aging body may be more difficult for 'athletes', such as dancers, to accept than people where 'the body' is less important in the formation of their self-identity (like, say, academics)" (Wainwright & Turner, 2006, p. 243).

Tulle (2007) argues that athletes are a distinct social group that exposes the broader discourses that limit agency of the aging individual. Indeed, studies have revealed that some young athletes hold particularly negative aging stereotypes (Phoenix, Faulkner, & Sparkes, 2005) and perceive

aging in terms of physical and cognitive decline (Phoenix & Sparkes, 2006). However, when compared to non-athletic control group, Roters et al. (2010) did not find significant difference between groups, both of which had relatively neutral expectations towards aging. In sport cultures, the negative stereotypes of aging have also been challenged by the Veteran or Master athletics movement that emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Tulle, 2008). In her research on veteran participants in track and field and endurance running, Tulle (2007, 2008) concluded that veteran athletes did not attempt to deny bodily aging, but rather sought to find alternative criteria to evaluate success and performance. Veteran athletics operated as a social context where the notions of competitiveness and success were challenged through shifting criteria from raw times to position among opponents within one's age group, or through the use of age-adjusted tables which allowed a broader comparison. Interestingly, Tulle's participants asserted that veteran athletics is the only sport where athletes look forward to growing older, because entering a new age category allows better chances of beating others already within that category (Tulle, 2008).

In sport psychology research, aging has been theorized as one of the four reasons for athletic retirement, alongside de-selection, injury and free choice (Taylor et al., 2006). There are no comprehensive statistics from previous studies on how often aging and decline in results are reported as the main reason for career termination, but these are often viewed as central causes for athletic retirement (Lavalée, Golby, & Lavalée, 2002; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994). Aging has been found to affect athletes' motivation for training and competing (Ogilvie & Taylor, 1993; Werthner & Orlick, 1986) and their evaluation of values and priorities (Svoboda & Vanek, 1982). Interestingly, Leung, Carre, and Fu (2005) found that declining performance was a major reason to retire for athletes who had not won medals in elite competitions, while winners did not perceive it as an important factor in their retirement. Moreover, Sinclair and Orlick (1993) found that athletes, retiring largely due to declining performance, experienced more problems with a lack of self-confidence and loss of social status than those retiring due to other reasons. Other studies, however, have not shown clear associations between aging and the quality of athletes' adjustment to post-sport life (Cecić Erpič et al., 2004; Fernandez et al., 2006).

In contrast to sociological research that has critically examined the discursive practices surrounding aging, sport psychology research on athletic career seems to subscribe to the ontology of aging. The most accepted and conventional definition of an athletic career as a pursuit aimed at achieving the person's peak in athletic performance in one or several sport events (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007) tends to prevail in the sport psychology literature. This account seems to exclude aging participants who no longer perform in their top level. Some career research texts reveal an aging bias when discussing athletes who either hang on too long (Rosenberg, 1980) or "accept this [aging and declining performance] as obvious, make plans for retirement, and move successfully into a new career area" (Gilmore, 2008, p. 48). These perspectives suggest that the reasonable athlete should retire when there are no more realistic hopes for new records or victories. Research evidence on Veteran athletics, however, suggests that many athletes resist the ontology of

aging (Stevenson, 2002; Tulle, 2007) and continue to pursue an athletic career in their later years. In order to revise the athletic career frameworks to account for also these sport participants, future research needs to tap into how aging athletes themselves understand their careers in sport, their identity as an athlete, and the meaning assigned to the sporting practices.

Existential perspectives on aging and career decision-making

From an existential psychological perspective, aging can be seen as an existential challenge in which one has to shift his/her sources of meaning and to redefine one's being-in-the-world within the changing embodiment (Längle, 2001; Längle & Probst, 2004). Aging brings one to an encounter with the existential given of finitude, which can lead to reflections on the meaning of one's life and career. Religious existentialists (e.g., Jaspers, 1970; Kierkegaard, 1992) saw physical finitude as a condition that may lead the individual to realize the transcendental, spiritual reality, while atheist existentialists (e.g., Sartre, 2007) emphasized the urgency to live authentically while still here. From the atheistic viewpoint, Yalom (1980) contended that "although the physicality of death destroys man, the idea of it saves him" (p. 30), meaning that this awareness can shift the person's mode of being. Drawing from Heidegger, Yalom (1980) distinguishes between *forgetfulness of being*, referring to the unreflective everyday life, and *mindfulness of being*, the continuous awareness of being itself. This awareness links closely to the notion of authenticity, which was central for both Kierkegaard (1992) and Heidegger (1962). Both asserted that a person should take a stand on one's being and act according to their true values and capabilities, while observing that most people dwell in unreflective, productive and superficial everyday life. One does not easily shift from one mode to the other simply by contemplation, but this shift often requires "a boundary situation" (Jaspers, 1970), an urgent experience of interruption of the everyday life. In the context of athletic careers, these situations may include injury, de-selection, overtraining, burnout, and realizing that the limits of one's physical performance have been reached. Indeed, some existential psychological insights into athletic life-worlds have been developed (e.g., Dale, 1996; Fahlberg, Fahlberg, & Gates, 1992; Nesti, 2006, 2007; Ronkainen, Harrison, & Ryba, 2013; Ryba, 2007), but these accounts have not examined aging and finitude specifically.

An existentialist perspective on career decision-making is grounded on the notions of personal meaning associated with career, the opportunities it provides for authentic existence, and responsibility to accept agency in the process (Cohen, 2003; Homan, 1986). Cohen (2003) moreover argues that career decision-making process, as a major life decision, can be conceptualized as an existential boundary situation, which makes it amenable to being investigated through an existential framework. He perceived career decision-making as a cyclical process of taking responsibility to choose a career path and then evaluating the meaning and authenticity of the choice and comparing it to alternatives. This again leads to new choices and new evaluations. Cohen believed that the process continues until the person finds a career which fulfills a sense of meaning and purpose and provides ways to express authenticity. Alternatively, if the person is unable to find a vocation

which can fulfill these desires, it may lead to an existential vacuum and feelings of frustration, emptiness, depression, and apathy (Cohen, 2003).

Method

Participants

The study participants were 10 Finnish, male, elite endurance athletes aged between 25 and 62, with the median age of 33.5 years. The participants were identified and contacted through personal networks and snowball sampling. Two interviewees were orienteers, two were middle-distance runners, and six were long-distance runners in distances up to marathon. All participants had competed in national championships and five athletes had reached international level (one in veteran categories). At the time of the interviews, two participants (aged 25 and 27) believed that they were still developing as athletes, three (aged 30, 34 and 35) were uncertain, and five (aged 30, 33, 42, 55 and 62) asserted that their peak years were behind them. However, only two participants considered themselves as retired and eight continued participating in competitive sport either in their top level or in veteran categories. Therefore, the sample allowed developing insights to anticipation, the actual process, as well as retrospection of encountering the perceived limits of athletic development.

Of the ten participants, five had been full-time athletes and the other five had been working or studying continuously during their athletic careers. In addition, all the professional athletes had completed or at least commenced education either in vocational school or at University before the years spent as a full-time athlete. That said, all athletes had anticipated the need to build alternative careers besides sport, acknowledging the short lifespan of professional careers in sport compared to other occupations.

In Finnish national culture, endurance running holds a significant status due to its history of high level success. The first major accolades came with Hannes Kolehmainen who won three gold medals in the Olympics in 1912, after which reporters came up with a saying that "Finland was run into the map of the World". In the first decades of Finnish independence, established in 1917, this success continued with the "Flying Finns", Paavo Nurmi and Ville Ritola. Also in the 1970s, the Finn Lasse Virén won four Olympic Gold Medals in long-distance running, strengthening the glorious reputation of Finnish endurance running. This celebrated history was mentioned by almost all endurance runners participating in the present study, and it was contrasted to the current low national level in Finnish running. Finnish orienteers had enjoyed success also in the recent years, and these participants did not mention such a historical burden and criticism in the contemporary media as the runners.

Data collection

All the athletes were interviewed twice by the first author, except for one athlete who was interviewed once and a follow-up was conducted through e-mail. The interviews were conducted in Finnish, and each interview lasted between 1 h 20 min and 2 h 10 min. Adopting the life story interview

method (Atkinson, 1998), the interviewees were invited to use their own words and expressions to tell their life histories. As Phoenix and Sparkes (2006) suggest, early life is a period when aging attitudes are developed, and these perceptions are either reinforced or resisted and reconstructed over the lifespan. The life story approach enables participants to talk about their lives from the present perspective, and also opens up possibilities to anticipate change and future choices. Life story is a suitable method for studying aging because it may reveal both prior attitudes and actual experiences of aging over the person's life course.

The participants were encouraged to recall early childhood experiences, memories of family and school, and the development of their career in sports, including affective experiences, difficulties and achievements, as well as the current relationship with their sport. In listening and transcribing these accounts the first author sought to discern how the interviewees storied the experience of encountering the limits of athletic development and how their beliefs, values and life philosophies shaped the stories being told. In the second interview, the researcher showed a timeline that was drawn based on the first interview and invited the participant to reflect on the major events and themes that emerged in the first interview. The participants were also asked to identify the most important boundary situations (Jaspers, 1970) they had experienced in life and sport. Finally, the participants were asked to talk about their hopes and plans for the future.

Reflexivity

During the research process, the first author wrote a reflexive journal where she reflected on the interview process, the themes emerging in the transcription and her own assumptions and attitudes. As a runner herself, the first author knew some of the participants beforehand, which helped in establishing contact and rapport with the participants. Her ability to relate to participants' experiences helped in building trust, but on the other hand some participants might have been more hesitant to reveal sensitive issues to a researcher who they knew from other context. The second and the third authors acted as "critical friends" (Wolcott, 1995), encouraging critical reflection and exploration of possible interpretations arising in the analysis. In translating parts of participants' stories to make them accessible to the other authors, the first author was simultaneously interpreting those stories and the significance of what had been told. The second and the third authors were not Finnish and not cultural insiders in endurance sports. This allowed them to adopt a level of distance in the analysis, which proved useful in discerning certain subcultural values, norms and practices.

Analysis

An integrated existential-narrative framework

"A man is always a teller of tales, he lives surrounded by his stories and the stories of others, he sees everything that happens to him through them; and he tries to live his own life as if he were telling a story".

[Sartre, 2007, p. 39]

Our theoretical approach was an integrated existential-narrative framework as outlined by Richert (1999, 2002, 2010) in psychotherapy. Epistemologically we approach aging as a phenomenon based on bodily experience, but interpreted and framed within a particular sociocultural context. We have grounded our work in relation to existentialist ideas regarding the boundaries of human existence (Jaspers, 1970), agency, authenticity (Heidegger, 1962) and meaning-making (Frankl, 1959). The narrative perspective, situated in critical constructivist position, enabled us to discern the cultural stories shaping personal meanings brought into experience.

Data analysis

All interviews were transcribed verbatim by the first author. The following data analysis was informed by two analytical procedures. First, a thematic analysis was conducted as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) to discern the central themes forming each personal story. The reading of the text was conducted through an existential lens; this required the researcher to pay special attention to existential themes such as authenticity, choice, freedom and responsibility, finitude, meaning and agency. Secondly, we conducted a narrative analysis of content and form. Polkinghorne (1988) asserts that a narrative is the primary means of rendering human experience meaningful. Since meaning and identity are embedded in narrative, personal stories also reveal how people relate to the fundamental givens of existence (Prasko, Mainerova, Jelenova, Kamaradova, & Sigmundova, 2012; Richert, 2010). Although the meanings given to experience are personal, they are always also shared: as Bruner (2004) argues, "given their constructed nature and their dependence upon the cultural conventions and language usage, life narratives obviously reflect the prevailing theories about 'possible lives' that are part of one's culture" (p. 694). Adopting narrative analytical method involves employing a holistic analysis which treats the story as a whole unit rather than fragmenting it to segments – a distinction which, according to Riessman (2008), forms the fundamental difference between narrative analysis and other forms of qualitative analysis. The analytical process was informed by Frank's (1995) concept of narrative types which guided us in discerning the core narratives that participants' stories depended on. According to Frank (1995), a narrative type is "the most general storyline that can be recognized underlying the plot and tensions of particular stories" (p. 75). Carless and Douglas (2009) assert that the dominant narrative type circulating the Western sporting cultures is the "performance narrative". Within the plot of this narrative type, personal records, winning, and achievements are pre-eminent and closely connected to the person's mental well-being, self-worth and identity. Athletes whose identities align with this narrative may experience high motivation and satisfaction with their careers as long as their results are improving and they are winning, while aging and declining performance pose a threat to the self and may lead to narrative wreckage, the collapse of the central story in one's life (Frank, 1995). From a psychological perspective, the problem with a performance narrative is that it conforms to the ontology of aging. After overcoming the peak of physical performance, this story is over, and the athlete may have an unrealistic

expectation and an impossibly high standard for developing the rest of one's life story (Scheibe, 1986).

Results

In our analysis, we found four major narrative types connected to encountering the limits of physical performance and/or aging. Accordingly, we now present an analysis of these narratives with their central existential themes with the following titles: a) *The end of an era*, b) *Putting things in perspective*, c) *The attitude has to change* and d) *Winning was never the only motive*.

The end of an era

In line with the performance narrative outlined by Carless and Douglas (2009), “the end of an era” represents stories of three athletes whose athletic career derived meaning mainly from improving their records and attaining good positions in competitions. Risto and Timo (retired) and Jouni (considering retirement) discussed encountering the limits of performance improvement as the natural end of their careers in sport. Winning was an important factor in choosing running in the specialization phase of their sport involvement, and constant improvement in running times was the driving force animating their practice.

Risto (30): I also played football, but I realized I did easily well in running, I was better at that... For me, the result in the competition was the measure for the training. It [the training] was not a great pleasure; it was just about pushing hard. If you were tired or in bad shape it was quite painful... The training in itself was not that important but the fact that I was developing.

In Risto's story from his youth, will and suffering were central existential themes. He admired runners, because they could endure that strenuous training and pain. He called his family philosophy the “through the gray stone” religion, referring to a Finnish saying which implies that one should push through all obstacles and barriers. Running derived meaning from the ability to fight and prove oneself as an athlete. He recalled an unlimited faith in himself: “of course the goal was to become an international elite runner.”

Similarly, Timo recalled that sport was essentially for him about exceeding his limits, always performing better.

Timo (33): I did not like running in the beginning. It was through success that it became my sport. Only later I found running also nice and realized that it had some noble principles (laughing). The biggest motivation for me to do sports was finding my limits, always running a new record...In my last years I had some injuries and the training did not really bring the same results as before. I realized that it didn't really take off. Maybe I was also losing faith in my development. Then I suddenly had a feeling that I had lost interest. I quit.

When unable to continue improving their results, these athletes realized that fundamental meaning they had assigned to athletic pursuits was lost. Therefore it seemed meaningless for them to continue this practice. In line with the plot of the performance narrative, they found little intrinsic meaning in

strenuous running after retirement, when their performance was no longer as is used to be.

Timo (33): After athletic retirement I had zero interest to go running. I don't need hard trainings anymore and I don't enjoy them. I also have no need, no interest, no motivation to participate in any kind of running competition. None. I am smart enough to know that I'm not going to run new records any more. It gives nothing to train now and see how fast I can run. It doesn't interest me. I know where I was able to get.

Risto (30): I have no more passion to put myself to the limit, when it doesn't make any difference. It is anyway far from what I have run before. It has no meaning any more. When I was younger it was only because I had to succeed, had to be in the limit.

These stories, with their strong emphasis on physical fitness and performance, conform to the “ontology of aging” proposed by Wainwright and Turner (2003). The third athlete with a similar narrative, a middle-distance runner in his 30s and thinking of retirement, planned to escape the condition by shifting to activities with less focus on objective measures which underpin track running.

Jouni (30): When I retire, I will leave the track and the high level thing behind. Maybe I could run in some jogging events, in city marathons, half marathons, orienteering... Things where the pace is not so important and not so easily measured. Of course it will be difficult to accept that the results will significantly decrease.

The feeling of emptiness was mentioned by all three athletes in connection to athletic retirement. Most strongly it was evident in Risto's story, whose career was characterized by overtraining and a single-minded focus on athletic success. At the time of encountering the doubt about his ability to significantly develop as a competitive runner, he lived alone, had no coach, and was getting tired of the pain of hard training. When allowing himself to think about alternative life directions, the frightening emptiness hit him:

Risto (30): I realized that damn, I really don't have anything else in life besides running. In a way running brought... the whole life was about running, and if I could not take it anymore, I would be totally groundless. What am I really going to do?

From an existential perspective, athletic retirement can be conceived as a symbolic death (Nesti, 2007), and for these athletes, it had been the death of the athletic self and the attitudes and values connected with it. In reflecting back to the years in high-level sport, Risto and Timo felt that they had significantly changed since those days.

Timo (33): That era, 10–15 years, it was all about sports. But then it ended. Now it is about completely different things. It would never cross my mind now that yeah, I'll start training twice per day. God damn how boring!

Putting things in perspective

One participant told performance-oriented stories similar to those described above, but he had accepted the decline in

running times and slightly adjusted his criteria of success after going over his peak years. His professional career in sport had ended when his physical performance started to decline, but in contrast to the first storyline, his sporting practices had not significantly changed in the post-peak years. From his story it became evident that running was part of his being. That is, despite getting a regular job, running remained a daily practice and competitions were still very important for him.

Pekka (42): I have never announced that now I retire. After not qualifying to a major international event I started to feel that I don't have big chances for development anymore. Being dropped out from the national team was also economically significant event. At that time I started to experience social pressure to start a normal life, our first child was three years old and we had a house loan and everything. I got myself a job. But, despite going to daily work I still won a Finnish Championship and other medals in the following years. It has been slow decline until these days...

Pekka maintained the performance narrative also in the years after starting to slow down. However, he told stories of modified goals, such as accomplishing a certain amount of running kilometers each year and a shift from running against the watch to running against others. He could still find competitive running empowering. This performance narrative, however, included acknowledgment and acceptance of lowering physical capacity.

Pekka (42): It is an interesting question why I continued to participate [in national championships] even if I was a minute slower than before. Maybe it is because I was still able to qualify, and just went along. Maybe it is also stupidity, maybe I should have quit in a more honorable way.

Pekka acknowledges the sporting master narrative of “the fallen athlete hero” (Tinley, 2012). This narrative, reproduced by media, constructs aging athletes as sad falling stars who should realize it is time to quit when the physical performance starts to decline. Pekka resisted this storyline, although he had difficulties in articulating why it was so. In his stories it became evident that the physical sensations associated with competition were a strong spark in his life.

Pekka (42): ...as soon as there is a test or a competition, then my competitive instinct awakens. If we compete, then it is for real. Of course, with the resources that one happens to have. Last spring in a club relay, of course we went there to win, and there I realized I was leading the race, challenging the younger runners, even if I don't have any physical resources for it any more. It's crazy.

Finally, while running was central part of his being, the meaning and value of this practice had fluctuated along his career path. Aging was not only about declining, but it also helped him to re-evaluate his values and find perspective.

Pekka (42): Running, it has been with me for 30 years. At some stages it has been the most important thing. My relationship with it changed a bit when I got into the national team. The public critique of endurance running and

runners in the 90s became also personal and my results were public knowledge. Time and position affected the day's income. Maybe it became too serious. Now I feel that running is in its right place again. It is the most important minor thing in life.

The attitude has to change

The third major storyline constructed declining performance as a boundary situation in which the person has to clarify or rethink his motives and abandon the performance narrative. Important existential themes of these stories were love for the sport, authenticity, belonging and anxiety.

For Kari, the metaphor for the boundary situation of aging was that of ‘the engine starts coughing’.

Kari (55): When I was around 40 I noticed that now the engine starts coughing. You can't compete with the young guys anymore. The game is over. If you really mean to continue running... with this attitude you will not continue, if you still try to fight against the younger runners.

Although the collective meaning of competitive running as chasing personal records was lost in this situation, Kari took strong agency in reshaping his practices to something that could still offer personal meaning.

Kari (55): The attitude has to change. From then you will only run for yourself. You can compete, because it motivates training. I am still competitive, but knowing myself that it has no meaning anymore to think that I need to be the best. It is not a reality anymore. The obsession to perform disappears at some point. Nowadays I have no competitive anxiety; it was the end of that.

Competitive anxiety was also mentioned by Jaakko (27), who had fought with it in his junior years:

I have been very anxious before, I was afraid of losing. It used to be the end of the world if I lost. It's not like that anymore. Now I can also enjoy going to the competition.

For Mika, enjoyment in sports and being a part of a runner community became the major sources of meaning in his athletic career after the peak years. He highlighted the importance of embodied sensations related to running: the enjoyment and arousal in training and competition, and the uneasiness when unable to run.

Mika (62): I really started to slow down after 55 years. Now it is mainly about the enjoyment of running and meeting friends in the competitions. I still have a competitive instinct and I like competing. The times and positions don't really matter as long as I can be a part of it and meet friends. To be there and have fun, that means a lot to me. And I can't really quit running because I get withdrawal symptoms (laughing).

Finally, the core existential theme that had kept Kari (55) running was the love for the sport.

You need faith. And you need hope that your efforts will bear fruit. And definitely, you need love. Without love for endurance running, it is all superficial. I don't think I could

have come all this way with any excuse or to seek acceptance or fulfill any internalized obligation. It would be such a stress... I would have died a long time ago.

Winning was never the only motive

Finally, three participants, Sami (25), Tommi (34), and Heikki (35), told complex narratives which actively resisted the performance narrative.

*Interviewer: What could be those bad sides [in sports]?
Tommi (34): The performance sport could be one, when it becomes too serious. People just stare at the watch, and the times are the only motivation for training. (...) I see it as poverty of the mind in a way.*

These athletes acknowledged that performance was an important part of the sport, but equal emphasis was given to fascination of running, the intrinsic value of the athletic experience in itself, the athlete community, traveling experiences, personal growth through sport and excitement in competitions. All participants had experienced boundary situations such as severe injuries and questioning their ability of performance improvement. Those experiences had forced them to think about their physical limits, career trajectories and meanings attached to their sport practices. Tommi told about the times of doubt whether he will be able to improve his records any more:

Tommi (34): ...at that time [at the age of 32] I was thinking that maybe I am not developing anymore, and that is the biggest crisis that an athlete can have. I was ready to accept that. After that I didn't see it as a mandatory goal that I need to break my records. Maybe I had to think what the motives are. Well, now I have thought and decided that it is about the joy in running and all the good things associated with it. The records come if they come.

Heikki's major boundary situation was a career-threatening injury:

Heikki (35): This major injury could have been the final nail to my career. At that time this feeling from my youth returned, that orienteering is the thing through which I want to experience this world. It is so strongly my thing and I still have things to experience within it. It was such a strong feeling that I still remember it and I am grateful that I'm now in good shape and able to run.

For Sami (26), his difficult period with injuries had also contributed to development of a spiritual faith:

The physical limits... That one learns to appreciate, to physically realize... I had those periods with injuries, which also lead to my encounter with God. I realized one cannot ground the life on these material things.

All these three athletes had a spiritual faith, and two of them explicitly connected the challenges faced in sport with personal and spiritual growth. Sport practice was also a way of exploring the world and one's embodiment within it. None of these athletes conformed to the ontology of aging, and one of them was deeply impressed about the veteran athletes

who "have something that we younger ones are missing". All could see a long involvement with sport ahead of them.

Tommi (34): I am thinking about endurance running, is it a destiny or what is it. Why should I quit something that I like so much? Others think about this as a project and others as a life style. That's what it is for me.

Discussion

All the athletes in the study acknowledged aging and encountering the perceived limit of athletic development as an existential threat to the athletic life project. Based on our findings we support the assertion by Carless and Douglas (2009) that the performance narrative underpins competitive sporting culture, and a significant personal effort and availability of alternative narrative resources are required from the athletes to resist it. When the meaning assigned to sport practice is essentially derived from athletic success, the experience of aging and declining physical performance poses a threat to the athlete's self and may lead to narrative wreckage. However, while this narrative type was visible in most athletes' stories of their early career stages, reflections provided about later and post-career years revealed that the majority of stories became more complex and gained meaning from multiple sources. A shift in the mode of being towards mindfulness of being (Yalom, 1980) was associated with aging and maturing as an athlete. When external rewards of sport participation were decreasing, the inner experience became more important and athletes also became more sensitive to this hidden aspect of athletic pursuits.

Based on our findings we propose that the discussion of athletic identity as "an Achilles' heel" for retiring athletes (Grove, Lavalley, & Gordon, 1997; Sparkes, 1998) should be opened up for more nuanced investigation of the meaning brought into the identification as an athlete. Although sport psychology has undoubtedly benefitted from the extensive research based on Brewer, Van Raalte, and Linder's (1993) early work on athletic identity, the subsequent dominance of this approach and almost exclusive use of the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS) has held back further advances. Indeed, there is a strong research evidence of the relationship between a strong athletic identity and psychologically challenging athletic retirement (Cecić Erpič et al., 2004; Lavalley & Robinson, 2007; Park et al., 2013), but a closer examination on the issue reveals that "the Achilles' heel" in these studies seems to be specifically the performance narrative that is drawn upon in bringing meaning to this identity. This aspect is, however, only one dimension of identification as an athlete, and recent work by Nesti and Littlewood (2011) has suggested that identity in sport could be better understood by drawing on ideas from existential psychology. From an existential perspective, much of the participants' uneasiness being expressed is around finding different ways to understand their relationship to running and reflecting on its place in their lives. Clearly for some, and we would argue at least as a strong sub theme for others, the dialogs reveal that the participants are offering views not only on the meaning of running, but more profoundly, on life meaning itself. Several athletes in the present study depicted running and orienteering as means to connect with

nature and oneself, and two spiritually oriented athletes depicted how sport was their way to experience the world. Most participants had grown up in very small towns or cities and their stories of numerous training runs alone in the dark forests were far from the picture of the fancy athletic life as depicted in the U.S. (Tinley, 2012). The reports provided by the Finnish athletes depicted runners and orienteers as self-critical people who often prefer their own company over big crowds. Also their sports, which have little to do with luck and much to do with committed training, were mentioned as special environments where these qualities could be learned. It could be argued that Finnish culture with its emphasis on modesty and “sisu,” the Finnish form of mental toughness, and moreover the low media coverage of the participants’ sports was clearly framing the stories being told. Therefore, when discussing the concept of athlete identity in the sport psychology literature, it is important to contextualize this with regard to the national and sport subcultures which form the background within which athletic careers and identities are rendered meaningful.

From a career development perspective, it can be concluded that the meanings assigned to the sport participation significantly affect the duration of the high-investment athletic career. Those two participants, who had decided to retire from their sport because of the lack of performance improvement, were both 27 years old at the time of their retirement – that is, from biological perspective they were not old for endurance sports. In comparison, a participant who kept training despite the uncertainty of his potential for performance improvement had achieved his best athletic performances in his mid-30s. When considering athletes’ development, the winning and achievement narrative with its focus on (quick) results might may not only potentially cause trauma in athletic retirement as suggested by Carless and Douglas (2009), but also lead to premature retirement and disengagement from sport practices.

We think that our findings have some important messages also for the practical work of coaches and applied sport psychologists in particular. First, athletes should be encouraged to explore and develop other sources of meaning in their sports beyond a narrow “winning is all” focus. It seems that where athletes are able to develop and/or maintain their love of the sport and not solely become driven by extrinsic rewards, they can remain at the top for longer and on occasion, find enjoyment in what they do. Second, it is quite clear that some athletes may need to be supported to discover additional sources of meaning also beyond their sport lives. Again, a number of experienced applied sport psychologists (Friesen & Orlick, 2010; Nesti, 2011; Ravizza, 2002) have emphasized that not only is this a more psychologically beneficial strategy for the athlete, but that it is a frequently encountered feature of those who manage to remain at the top levels in elite and professional sports for considerable periods of time. In other words, having forms of personal meaning, including spiritual and religious belief, that are not affected by the vagaries of sporting success and achievement not only is more enjoyable but can also help provide the athlete with a more healthy relationship to their sport. With this in mind, we would hope that sport psychologists will be more prepared to help athletes to see aging and the inevitable decline in sport performances as something that may not always be enthusiastically welcomed,

but can at least be accepted gracefully and as evidence of our human condition.

Finally, from a philosophical level of analysis, it is possible to detect where athletes seem to view their body as a physical machine, their descriptions of “the engine which starts coughing” and “losing power” and the use of other mechanical terminology points to mind/body dualism. Indeed, it has been argued that Western sport culture encourages athletes to view their bodies as instruments (Hoberman, 1992; Messner, 1992). As a fortress of dominant cultural ideals of masculinity, sport teaches males to value abstract achievement – winning and records (Kidd, 2013). The implications flowing from this type of unreflexive thinking around the mind/body relationship are many, including the potential of narrative disruption when the body-machine no longer “works” (Sparkes & Smith, 2002). It could be argued that a different sport culture, one that placed less emphasis on winning as the only measure of achievement, could have considerable impact on how athletes view aging and career termination. A practical outcome of this research, echoing Smith (2013), has been to make visible some alternative narratives that resist the dominant performance narrative and open up new resources for storying athletic lives in more empowering ways.

Closing thoughts

The purpose of this study was twofold – first, to understand how male endurance athletes bring meaning to the experience of aging and secondly, to investigate how meaning brought by aging affects career trajectories in sport. The participants’ stories not only confirmed but also resisted the culturally dominant narrative of aging-as-decline. Performance decline, as opposed to the implicit assumptions in theoretical models in athletic career research, did not lead to athletic retirement with some of the participants. This was affected not only by the existential meanings brought into the athletic life, but also by the social structures that allowed career continuity after the peak years. We therefore suggest that understanding of career development and decision-making could be enhanced by including existential theorizing and increasing cultural sensitivity to differences within national and sport sub-cultural contexts (see also Stambulova & Ryba, 2013).

Researchers have emphasized the significance of gender in the study of life course (Krüger, 1996) and the experiences of aging and athletic retirement (Tinley, 2012). This study only examined the male perspective, while the experiences of female athletes should equally be examined in future work. Moreover, since the participants were recruited through running and orienteering communities, the sample presents only those athletes who had sustained contacts with these communities. As such, the majority of the participants of the study were those who had a strong continuity of the athletic and/or runner identity after overcoming the athletic peak, while the voices of those who had completely disengaged from the culture were only echoes within the stories. However, rather than attempting to generate a universal typology for sporting narratives of aging, our study has aimed to illustrate how specific (male, Finnish, endurance sport) athletes make meaning of the existential experience. While finitude and performance decline is a universal concern for all athletes, the ways in which they encounter it and bring meaning to it is situated and affected

by sport subculture, national culture, gender and other canonical narratives which promote certain stories while silencing others.

Finally, we have aimed to illustrate the benefits of an existential-narrative framework in researching aging and career decision-making in sports. An existential approach, combined with narrative analysis of prevailing cultural master narratives, has potential to recognize both individual and shared aspects of people's experiences. Moreover, existential approach can provide a philosophical underpinning to athletic career research and consultation and help in addressing issues which are not included within cognitive-behavioral approaches, such as authenticity, spirituality, responsibility, and the search for personal meaning. Rather than viewing strong athletic identity as a problem for aging and retiring athletes, an existential-narrative practitioner would inquire to the meaning and storyline connected to this identity. Through encountering the given of finitude and reflecting on it, maturing athletes may be able to clarify what it means for them to participate in competitive sport and identify a future course of action for their careers that is authentic and meaningful to them.

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